DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 087 SO 009 624

TITLE	The Celebration of Death: Two Folk Tales about DEath. Mini-Module.
INSTITUTION	African-American Inst., New York, N.Y. School Services Div.
PUB DATE	[76]
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	African-American Institute, 833 United Nations Plaza, New York, New York 10017 ($0.50, 4 for $1.50)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	African American Studies; *African Culture; *Area Studies; *Attitudes; Comparative Analysis; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Education; *Death; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Folk Culture; Learning Modules; Lesson Plans; Resources; Secondary Education; Social Attitudes; Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS	Africa

ABSTRACT

This module contains two African folk tales about death, two descriptions of African funerals, a lesson plan with 11 questions exploring the finality of and customs surrounding death, and a bibliography of five books which deal with African religious beliefs. The folk tales present concepts of death and immortality of the soul. The descriptions of funerals document traditional and modern customs surrounding the death of an individual, including cleansing the body, preparing special foods, burial, and recognizing "the living dead." The questions for discussion are based on the idea that death is feared in every society, although it is known to be inevitable. Some questions encourage children to examine psychological reasons for the African views of death and funeral customs; other questions involve a comparative study of African and Western attitudes toward death. A film is recommended which shows the funeral of the leader of the Ashanti nation. (AV)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

The African-American Institute

833 United Nations Plaza New York, New York 10017 Tel: (212) 661-0800 Cable: AFRAM

SCHOOL SERVICES DIVISION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Evelyn Jones Rich TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

ED132087

THE CELEBRATION OF DEATH

Two Folk Tales About Death

A Ugandan Folk Tale

Kintu, the ancestor of all Baganda in Uganda, fell in love with Nambi, the beautiful daughter of God. After Kintu had proved himself a worthy husband for her, God decided they could marry. The wedding took place in Heaven and afterwards, the couple were to return to earth. To help them establish themselves there, God gave the couple a goat, sheep, fowl and the banana tree. Then He told them to leave early the next morning before Nambi's brother, Walumbe (Death), returned from his journey. Walumbe was very fond of his sister and would be very angry if he thought she went away without him; on the other hand, God did not want Walumbe to descend to earth for he knew Walumbe would take unhappiness with him.

The next morning, Nambi and Kintu left very early. As they were half-way to earth, Nambi remembered she had forgotten the grain to feed the fowl. Against her father's warning, she rushed back to Heaven hoping to avoid running into Walumbe. But she did not. Her brother was furious and he refused to let her out of his sight, insisting on going with her to her new home.

And that is how Death came to people on earth.

Children are also told how God took pity on Man after Walumbe spread his unhappiness. Eventually, He decided that even though people would continue to die on earth, He would reward them if they lived their lives well there. After a person's life on earth then, he lives in another world closer to God and gains new knowledge about Heaven.

SO 009 624

A Folk Tale from Zaire

The Ngbandi of Zaire say that long ago Death and Soul were enemies. Death used to brag that he could kill Soul; Soul always answered: "I will not be killed." Every time Death tried to defeat Soul something happened to his plans and he failed. One day Death decided he had a foolproof plan for getting Soul. First, he sent Soul an invitation to come to a feast where they would swear to live at peace forever. Then he called in all his soldiers for a meeting.

Now Soul was somewhat suspicious of Death's real intentions so he asked his friend Bat to go to Death's town and see what he could learn. Bat went and hung upside down under the eaves of Death's roof, where no one noticed him. Soon he heard Death say to his soldiers: "Finally I am going to kill Soul! I have invited him here as my guest. I shall let him sleep in my house and I shall move into a smaller place so he sees that I want the very best for his comfort. When he is asleep, you, Lightning, will go up to a cloud and as it passes over the house, you will jump from it on to the place and destroy him!" Death's soldiers thought this a very good plan. Bat flew home to tell Soul.

Death and Soul...

Soul arrived at Death's town and was received with great ceremony. Death vacated his house for his honoured guest and everyone, but Bat, settled down for a good night's sleep. When Bat saw the cloud approaching he quickly awakened Soul and they rushed away from the town back to their home.

The house was destroyed totally.

Death was ecstatic and ordered a large celebration, especially to honor Lightning, because he had finally killed Soul. Just as they were about to begin, they heard the noises from afar of the celebration Soul had begun because he was saved. Death was so angry and humiliated, he vowed never to have an encounter with Soul again.

Since then the Soul has been immortal.

* * *

AFRICAN FUNERALS : TWO VIEWS

Death : A Traditional Response

Hozani Mtimkulu, the elder in the town near Benbesi, died last week at the age of 65. His relatives had gathered by his bedside, including one brother and his oldest son. Since death appeared to be taking its time, an ox was killed to hasten the event. The ox symbolized the links between the deceased and the living members of the family. Killing it guaranteed that John Smith would find a warm welcome in a friendly community of the hereafter. His son's presence affirmed that Hozani Mtimkulu was alive in his children.

Immediately after death, the brother began digging a grave in an uncultivated ground. Other men joined and helped him. The body was wrapped in a blanket and removed from the house through a hole in the wall and through an opening in the fence which surrounded the compound. This symbolized the belief that the deceased person has not truly gone but remains in spirit.

Men, carrying the body, led the funeral procession. Women followed. A few personal belongings were placed in the grave with the body*. The grave was filled and thorn branches piled around to keep animals from digging it up.

The procession returned home where another ox was killed, the meat roasted**, and all the bones burned completely***. A drink was made from them and each person swallowed some. Then they all went down to the river, washed themselves**** and returned to their own homes.

The brother and oldest son remained in the home for the night. So did two or three women relatives who participated in the wailing.

Early the next morning the son and brother visited the grave to see whether or not it had been destroyed. Since it had not, all assumed that Hozani Mtimkulu had died of natural causes. If the grave had been disturbed, a diviner would have been summoned to investigate the cause of death and to take counter-measures.

One to three months later, the burial party will be called together again to observe a special ritual. They will wash all implements used for the burial with beer specially brewed for the occasion. A year later there will be the final ceremony where all the relatives and friends gather for a big festival and dancing. Beer, brewed from grain raised since the death of Hozani Mtimkulu, is drunk.

All restrictions imposed on the family are now lifted and everyone returns to normal life. The widow is free to remarry, the property is divided*****.

---

* The deceased will take the belongings with him to the hereafter.

** The roasted meat will provide him with meat for the trip to the hereafter and meat in the next world.

*** The drink unites the deceased with surviving family and community.

**** Washing cleanses one from the death.

***** The final ceremony invites the deceased back and renews contact with him in the hereafter.

4 Death : A "Modern" Response *

Harry McCauley, a member of the African Episcopal Church in Banjul, The Gambia, died suddenly last week of a massive heart attack. Only 47 years old, Mr. McCauley had been hospitalized two days previously, complaining of mild chest pains. His death was sudden and unexpected.

The announcement of his death was limited to close relatives to allow time for the necessary clearing and decorating of the house. This included removing or covering all mirrors, and hanging white lace curtains at the windows.

White sheets and lace bedspread covered the bed upon which the body was laid. Occasionally blue accessories are used to provide color. Where the deceased is female, friends often purchase the white dress material for the shroud, white gloves, stockings and head dress.

The washing of the deceased was a major affair. Where the dead person belongs to a fraternity or sorority, members of the appropriate society carry out this assignment. Special hymns are sung by those present. All try to console the bereaved. The body is then laid out on the bed for friends and relatives to view. Then the family officially announces the death and friends come to call until the funeral which is usually between 4 and 5 in the afternoon. The corpse is now placed in the coffin and perfume is sprayed on it, in the hope that on the third day or after, the deceased will visit the home and signal his/her presence. From the time of death, food is prepared and served to everyone present.

Mr. McCauley's hour-long funeral service was held in St. Mary's Church. After the burial, everyone returned to Mr. McCauley's home to sympathize with the bereaved. Since the dead person was a married man, his widow will sleep in the bed on which the corpse reposed, perhaps for the rest of her life.

On the third day after the funeral fruits, nuts, bread, biscuits and any other snacks were served, mainly to children. All food purchased or contributed is eaten. Nothing is permitted to remain until the next day.

On the morning of the seventh day, beans and pepper cooked in palm oil as well as a kind of porridge (lahh) made from millet and ground nuts (peanuts) is served to all those present. A bit of each will be taken to the gate where two small holes will be dug. The chief mourner will put the food in the holes and pour a libation.

Later in the afternoon, jollof rice, foo foo and soup are available with lots of drinks. Occasionally, the deceased's favorite food is prepared and everyone shares in the memory of the departed one. None of the prepared food is kept in the house until the next day. The Memorial Service usually occurs in church on the first Sunday after the seventh day following the death. After the service, all those present follow the bereaved family home. Again food including a special dish, and drinks are served. Mourning now officially begins and the bereaved wear black for a year.

The final celebration of death occurs at the end of that year when the day begins with a mass and ends with congratulations that the mourning period has been fully observed and has been free from tragic events. Though some no longer observe any formal recognition of death, frequently every subsequent anniversary of the death is celebrated.

---

*Adapted from material provided by Victoria Clarke, Banjul, The Gambia.

THE CELEBRATION OF DEATH

IS DEATH FINAL?

- LESSON PLAN -

Though death is inevitable, it is feared in every society. Africans, like others, ask WHY? Modern science answers in a host of ways. But many Africans believe that every human death has external causes - making it natural and/or unnatural. In the quest to find out 'why', there are many answers. There is magic and sorcery. There are powerful curses. There is the "living-dead" - the spirits of others who have died previously but whose memory survives in those left behind. And there is always God - especially when no other explanation satisfies.

Burial is most commonly used to dispose of the body. But death is not final. The person simply moves on to join others who are deceased. The physical body dies but the spirit lives. He is a living-dead.

Survivors cling tightly to the idea of the deceased, remember him/her always and revere the departed person. The relationship with the living-dead is maintained through libations (offerings to the spirit in liquid form poured onto the soil), gifts of food and other items, prayers and observance of special rites. That is why the bonds between the living and the dead are so close and the relationship in death so alive.

Death comes only when there are no longer survivors who remember the dead person. Union with God is thus achieved.

1. Why might the folk tales about death appeal to children?	1. -They explain a difficult concept in a simple way. -Children are more likely to respond positively to the explanations.
2. How do Africans feel about death?	2. -It is inevitable; every death has an explanation; death is not final but a transition to the next world.
3. How do Africans respond to the occasion of death?	3. -Traditional Africans seem to accept and express sadness differently from Westerners. -The idea of the living-dead is central to most traditional African societies and those who have been Westernized/modernized probably do not reject it fully.
4. What similarities do Africans share with Westerners regarding death?	4. -Most important is the funeral which acknowledges the occurrence of death. -Both bury the dead as the most common way of disposing of the body. -The belief in the hereafter. -The period of mourning.

.../2

5. Why is death a celebration among most African people?

5. -The deceased has moved on to the hereafter.
-The deceased remains with them as the "living-dead".
-Shows respect for the deceased.
-It is an occasion to remember the good works of the deceased; bad acts are attributed to evil influences.

6. Under what circumstances do we "celebrate" death?

6. -If the deceased has lived a long, full and productive life, the occasion of death is not as sad. If the deceased endured prolonged suffering (last stages of an incurable illness) death is a blessing.

7. Which view of death seems most appropriate - the traditional or the Western?

7. -It depends -- Africans, like Westerners, have been acculturated to respond to death in a particular way.

ENRICHMENT

1. How are Western attitudes about death changing?

1. -The financial expense of death has been criticized.
-The memorial service is becoming increasingly popular.
-Some are making individual donations of vital organs and/or bodies upon death.
-Rarely is there no funeral service of any kind.
-Euthanasia is a controversial subject.

2. Why do most cultures believe in an after-life?

2. -The hope of another life softens the fear of death.
-The idea of immortality is irresistible.

3. Compare and contrast African and Western monuments to death.

3. -Africans carve ancestor figures to symbolize relationship with the deceased.
-Westerners often place tombstones on the graves.
-The mausoleum can be considered a monument to death in the West.
-Money is often left to build buildings named after the deceased as a monument.
-Other Western monuments include scholarship funds, etc.

4. View the film, "A Great Tree Has Fallen" which shows the funeral of the leader of the Ashanti nation who died a few years ago.

4. -Obtain from Indiana University, African Studies Program, Bloomington, IND 47401. 16 mm. color. About 30 minutes. Special school rental rates available.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ulli Beier. The Origin of Life and Death. African Creation Myths. African Writers Series. Humanities Press. Highland Park, NJ

Jan Knappert, compiler. Myths and Legends of the Congo. London: Heinemann, 1971.

John S. Mbiti. African Religions and Philosophy. Praeger. 1971. New York.

David B. Stafford. "Should the Study of Death Be a Necessary Preparation for Living?" in Controversial Issues in the Social Studies. A Contemporary Perspective. National Council for the Social Studies. 45th Yearbook 1975.

Asavia Wandira. Indigenous Education in Uganda. Kampala: Makere University, 1971.

* * *